Ben Jonson's Vocation and the "Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland"

JOHN
BAXTER

Résumé : *Cet article explore une série de questions concernant l'engagement de Ben Jonson dans la poésie en tant que profession : cette profession, quand la trouva-t-il ? en quoi consiste-elle ? quel est son prix ? qui en tire le profit ? La conclusion, mettant en valeur les épigrammes adressés à ses libraires, indique quelques conséquences de cette profession ; la partie antérieure maintient que l'« Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland » met en lumière d'importants aspects des talents de Jonson comme poète dramatique et de sa « découverte » (d'après son expression plus tardive dans Timber) de ce il devait imiter en lui-même.*

Jonson was a professional, both in the sense that he wrote for money and in the sense that he had a kind of absolute commitment to his art. In *Timber: or Discoveries* he permits himself a few rueful comments on the returns to be expected from such a commitment: "Poetry, in this latter age, hath proved but a mean mistress, to such as have wholly addicted themselves to her, or given their names up to her family." The irony of this lament focuses not simply on the disproportion — the greater the allegiance, the less lucrative the return — but on the puzzling nature of the "family" and of the sort of "names" it signifies. Other "families" seem to have a clearer sense of identity: writers who have "but saluted [poetry] on the by, and now and then tendered their visits, she hath done much for, and advanced in the way of their own professions (both the Law and the Gospel) beyond all they could have hoped, or done for themselves, without her favour."¹ There is, here, a marked envy of the career-seeker (lawyer or priest) who would use poetry as a kind of stepping stone to bigger things. But it is equally clear that for Jonson, there is no serious alternative to being a poet — perhaps because,

for him, there is, in an important sense, no bigger thing. His view of the high calling of the poet exists, one might even say thrives, alongside the more mundane necessities of life. Being a poet is a “name” worth having, a name that should rank highly, but a name that leaves unanswered some basic questions about how to get a living. Jonson explored a whole series of answers, some more provisional than others, throughout his long career, but I want to focus on three poems — one to the Countess of Rutland and two to his booksellers — that illuminate what might be called his search for an appropriate fit in his vocation. The “Epistle to Elizabeth” is much the most important of the three, as it shows Jonson not only in the act of defending the profession of the poet but also in the process of discovering formative aspects of his particular profession. Equally important is the timing of the epistle — “a New Year’s gift for 1600” (Parfitt, ed., p. 514) — a kind of threshold, for the century and for Jonson’s career. The epigrams to the booksellers outline some of the significant consequences of following that career and that profession. There are discoveries in these short poems which echo or anticipate the more prosaic *Discoveries* to be found in Jonson’s commonplace book and at the same time give them a dramatic edge and a greater sense of immediacy.

Jonson’s is a time of aristocratic patronage and of emerging capitalistic enterprise, and while these may seem to offer vastly different opportunities (and risks), there are, nonetheless, some interesting connections. L. C. Knights, speaking of both Jonson and Donne, has remarked that “the word ‘patronage’ introduces us to a strange and unfamiliar world,” not the less strange “because of the ways in which good and honourable men, as well as men of genius with a worldly streak, accepted an hierarchical system and found nothing dishonourable in seeking the favour of the great.”² Jonson’s acceptance of the hierarchy is discernible especially in his dealings with the Sidney family, most notably in the way he celebrates their estate and its civilized virtues in “To Penshurst” or the Sidney bloodlines in the “Ode. To Sir William Sidney, on His Birthday.” But the “Epistle to Elizabeth” illustrates a more complex attitude toward seeking the favour of the great, an attitude that connects this poem with the more individualistic entrepreneur who inhabits the world of the London booksellers. As Deborah Montuori has said, “The distance between poet and patroness, magnified by gender, can only remind him of his social status and financial dependence.”³ Montuori is right, I believe, to argue that gender differences generate new complications in Jonson’s exploration of his “interrelated personal and professional desires” and lead to what she calls “the uncertain voice beneath Jonson’s calculated performance” in this poem.⁴ The uncertainty, however, is focused not only on the issues of family, gender, and class that she

discusses, but also on some very basic questions about what, exactly, Jonson's professional desires are.

The epistle, from the middle of *The Forest* (number XII), is sent, significantly, as a gift to the daughter of Sir Philip Sidney on the first day of a new century. The occasion seems ready made for grand gestures and large perspectives, though Jonson's admiration for the Countess and for her father is similarly set forth in the stunning compliments he offers to both of them in Epigram LXXIX:

That poets are far rarer births than kings,
Your noblest father proved: like whom, before,
Or then, or since, about our muses' springs,
Came not that soul exhausted so their store. (Parfitt, ed., p. 59, ll. 1–4)

William Drummond records Jonson as saying, "The Countess of Rutland was nothing inferior to her father . . . in poesy" (Parfitt, ed., p. 466), and the epigram moves beyond even this compliment to assert that were her father now to view her "rare, and absolute numbers," he would "burn, or better far his book" (p. 59, l. 12).

The sense of the poet's calling in these compliments is obviously a high one. It is also aristocratic, driven by ambition, competition, and emulation. That Sir Philip could be either defeated by his daughter or taught by her to improve on his already outstanding achievements suggests some interesting things about how Jonson saw the process of emulation — working across the generations and between the sexes.⁵ The feeling of competition may be as much or even more Jonson's own than Elizabeth's, and the sense of restless ambition or striving is certainly his: poets are rarer than kings, daughters may exceed their fathers, and Nature can take some surprising turns, not least in providing a female rather than a male heir in order to take retaliation against the destinies for the death of Sidney.

When he sends his gift to her on New Year's Day in 1600, then, Jonson is confident that it will receive a fair acceptance: "With you, I know, my offering will find grace. / For what a sin 'gainst your great father's spirit, / Were it to think, that you should not inherit / His love unto the muses" (Parfitt, ed., p. 111, ll. 30–33). His confidence, moreover, is not simply that his poem will find aristocratic favour or indulgence, but that it will itself be taken as a representative of the pinnacle of aristocratic virtue:

Beauty, I know, is good, and blood is more;
Riches thought most: but, madam, think what store
The world hath seen, which all these had in trust,
And now lie lost in their forgotten dust.
It is the muse, alone, can raise to heaven,

And at her strong arms' end, hold up, and even,
The souls, she loves. (Parfitt, ed., p. 112, ll. 37–43)

“Hold up, and *even*, / The souls, she loves”: the intellectual gifts of the poet are presented as having an equalizing power. In this context, it is clearly possible to give your gift and have it too, and the biblical precept, “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), takes on a whole new meaning. A poem which offers itself as a gift purports to be something more or something other than an “epistle mendicant”; it purports to be itself an act of largesse, dispensing poetic patronage.

But in addition to allowing the poet to hold his own in an aristocratic world, to maintain or “hold up” the intellectual soul and to counteract or at least neutralize the inequalities of an aristocratic order, this New Year’s gift also speaks rather cryptically about something new that the poet contributes to society, when Jonson speaks of his “strange poems, which, as yet, / Had not their form touched by an English wit” (ll. 81–82). This claim comes as the climax of a short passage in which he outlines a project that he is planning but has yet to complete:

which when time shall bring
To curious light, the notes I then shall sing,
Will prove old Orpheus’ act no tale to be:
For I shall move stocks, stones, no less than he.
Then all, that have but done my muse least grace,
Shall thronging come, and boast the happy place
They hold in my strange poems, which, as yet,
Had not their form touched by an English wit.
(Parfitt, ed., p. 113, ll. 76–82)

George Parfitt comments that “the *notes* in question refer to a projected celebration of the ladies of Britain which Jonson either never wrote or which has disappeared” (p. 516). What interests me about the project is not so much the plan to celebrate the ladies, or to create in the process a vision of an ideal or idealized society, but that in the course of doing these things the poet will be inviting the ladies into a “happy place,” a place, moreover, strange and un-English (or at least hitherto unknown in English). The poet-intellectual by this account is not merely joining society or finding his role in it, but creating it. He is in, and the aristocratic ladies are out, until he invites them in. There is, of course, a sort of cheeky insouciance in this tactic that is probably more fantasy or wishful thinking than reality, but in some sense Jonson is also serious. His poems are strange, and his forms are unprecedented in English because he is bringing to bear on his English verse his long study of the classical tradition — precisely because, in other words, of his

gifts as a scholar and an intellectual.⁶ The role of the intellectual is to enlarge the vision of society.

The confident tone in the claim about “strange poems,” however, rather disguises a number of interesting questions concerning the exact nature of the originality that Jonson is laying claim to. That his poems have a form not hitherto “touched by an *English* wit” implies that such form has been touched and handled by the wits of other languages, and this implication, of course, accords perfectly well with some of Jonson’s central ideas about imitation as these get articulated in *Discoveries*:

The third requisite in our poet, or maker, is imitation, to be able to convert the substance, or riches of another poet, to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the principal. Not, as a creature, that swallows, what it takes in, crude, raw, or indigested; but, that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment. (Parfitt, ed., p. 448)

Joseph Loewenstein has recently commented on what he calls “Jonson’s curiously emphatic shift from imitation of poems to imitation of poets,” and he argues that “[t]he terms of this description of an ideal *imitatio* suggest the uncertainties of identity that haunt imitation at this particular historical moment.”⁷ He further argues:

Of course in the late 1590s, the “one excellent man” whom Jonson vociferously chose to follow above the rest was Horace, yet even at this early date, the inappropriateness of this “choise” must have been as obvious to Jonson’s colleagues as it seems to us: it hardly takes hindsight to alert one to the very un-Horatian fervor of Horace as Jonson portrays him in *Poetaster*. One way of mapping Jonson’s creative development would be to follow the process by which other literary models — Aristophanes, Lucian, Cicero, but above all, Martial — jostle Horace. . . . That Jonson is too bilious to digest Horace is, at any rate, clear enough in *Poetaster*.⁸

Much of this commentary seems fair enough. The un-Horatian Horace of the play is a strange creature, and it is surely right that other literary models should jostle with Horace, here and elsewhere. But the difficulties involved seem more than a matter of problems with Jonson’s metaphorical digestive system or of his failure to achieve, in any given play, the measure of identification with his original that he might seem to desire.

The passage in *Discoveries* which follows the one quoted above is clearly headed for a more complex sense of imitation, when it warns that the poet ought

Not, to imitate servilely, as Horace saith, and catch at vices, for virtue: but, to draw forth out of the best, and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish, and savour: make our imitation sweet: observe how the best writers have imitated, and follow them. How Virgil, and Statius

have imitated Homer; how Horace, Archilochus; how Alcaeus, and the other lyrics; and so of the rest. (Parfitt, ed., p. 448)

The process of creative development that Loewenstein envisions mapping out is clearly one that Jonson himself was highly conscious of. Observing how the best writers have imitated and following them is, in a sense, to have it both ways: to make choice of one excellent man *and* to make room for other literary models. At what precise point this process may be considered to have made “our imitation sweet,” however, may be a matter of considerable critical interest and dispute. Even the theory itself may be sweeter here in “Discoveries” than it is in the presumably much earlier *Poetaster*, and in any case the question of imitation and originality that arises in the context of the commonplace book and the play may be not quite the same sort of question as that which needs to be asked concerning the “strange poems” alluded to in the “Epistle to Elizabeth.”

As a strangely formed dramatic figure, the character of Crites in *Cynthia's Revels* (a predecessor of the Horace in *Poetaster*) may be nearer the mark, largely because he is so thoroughly estranged from much of the society he finds himself in. Like the objects of the epideictic rhetoric of the “Epistle to Elizabeth,” Crites is remarkable for the singularity of his virtues — for their undisguised and inimitable qualities — and for his freedom from self-love. The form of his character is poised between severity and lenity, and it exhibits a marked antipathy to the fraudulent and the fake. As a result, he is summoned by Cynthia near the end of the action to judge all of the play’s offenders, all of whom are guilty of “the seeming face / Of neighbour virtues, and their borrowed names.”⁹ Crites, who believes that vice is its own punishment as virtue is its own reward, subjects them to a very brief penance of weeping and then admonishes them to “become / Such as you fain would seem” (V.xii.155–56). Cynthia approves the leniency of this judgment and then concludes:

‘Princes that would their people should do well
Must at themselves begin, as at the head;
For men, by their example, pattern out
Their imitations, and regard of laws;
A virtuous court a world to virtue draws.’ (V.xi.169–73)

It is a neat and symmetrical conclusion: there is clearly a wrong and a right way to go about imitation, a fraudulent kind and an exemplary kind, and the play closes with strong commendation of the exemplary. Like *Poetaster*, *Cynthia's Revels* is eager to expose the sham, the plagiarist, the poseur; and,

like that play, it is full of interesting critical pronouncements but comparatively empty of anything that could be called dramatic interest or tension.

The strange exemplary poems that Jonson boasts of in the "Epistle to Elizabeth" may, of course, be primarily (perhaps even exclusively) a matter of his non-dramatic work, but the interesting fact is that the epistle has more genuinely dramatic material in it — at least at certain moments — than either of the two plays from the same period. There is, for example, a moment of tension in that section of the poem to the Countess of Rutland which alludes to a rival poet (possibly Michael Drayton),¹⁰ but a more high-energy moment occurs in the poem's opening meditation on the insufferable power of gold. It is a curious feature of this poetic "gift" that it opens with a baroque complaint about the overwhelming and pervasive influence of the almighty dollar:

Madam,
 Whilst that, for which, all virtue now is sold,
 And almost every vice, almighty gold,
 That which, to boot with hell, is thought worth heaven,
 And, for it, life, conscience, yea, souls are given,
 Toils, by grave custom, up and down the court,
 To every squire, or groom, that will report
 Well, or ill, only, all the following year,
 Just to the weight their this day's presents bear;
 While it makes huishers serviceable men,
 And some one apteth to be trusted, then,
 Though never after; whiles it gains the voice
 Of some grand peer, whose air doth make rejoice
 The fool that gave it; who will want, and weep,
 When his proud patron's favours are asleep;
 While thus it buys great grace, and hunts poor fame;
 Runs between man, and man; 'tween dame, and dame,
 Solders cracked friendship; makes love last a day;
 Or perhaps less: whilst gold bears all this sway,
 I, that have none (to send you) send you verse. (Parfitt, ed., p. 111, ll. 1–19)

This strong, exploratory period really goes on for another seven lines (in spite of the manuscript punctuation, which insists, prematurely, that it closes at this point), but I will pause at this opportune moment at line 19.¹¹ The poet doesn't have gold (at least not enough to be able to send the Countess any) but he does have verse, a currency which, he thinks, ought to count for at least as much as gold, but which is clearly in an exposed position in the unstable world of the money-markets. The energy of this denunciatory rhetoric is surely connected to the lament with which I began about poetry's

being a “mean Mistress,” and while the diatribe against gold may be intended to portray the poet as maintaining an aristocratic disdain for and distance from such money-grubbing, it also has the paradoxical effect of conveying an intimate and detailed knowledge of such activity.

Sara Van den Berg gives a good general account of the complex energy of this poem:

The epistle to the Countess of Rutland combines several characteristic Jonsonian actions: the poet distinguishes himself from the rest of her entourage, attacks materialistic society, reflects on the power of poetry, and celebrates the lady as a moral exemplar. These diverse actions could have resulted in a loosely discursive epistle, but the poem gains structural unity from the shifting relationship between gold and poetry in the language of the epistle. Gold the poet first condemns as a commodity antithetical to poetry but then transforms into a metaphor of everything he values.¹²

The resulting transformation no doubt does increase the poem’s structural unity, but there nevertheless remains an unresolved tension between the satirical opening and the epideictic portions of the poem. Not everything in the opening submits to the transformation. In his satirical exploration of the power of gold — as much as in his investigations into the relationship of praise and patronage — the poet is in the act of discovering how to be “advanced in the way of [his] own profession,” though perhaps not in a way which he himself immediately recognizes. The society depicted in this satirical opening is recognizably the same sort of society depicted in Jonson’s great comedies. We may hear anticipations of *The Alchemist*, for example, in the transmutation that turns gold into a liquid which “Runs between man, and man; ’tween dame, and dame; / Solders cracked friendship; makes love last a day; / Or perhaps less.” The rhythm of the verse suggests the same sort of feverish activity as the play and, ultimately, the same sort of anti-climactic let-down. Or we may see a proleptic sketch of the legacy-hunters in *Volpone*, who will report “Just to the weight their this day’s presents bear,” as gold makes ushers (and parasites) “serviceable men / And some *one* apteth to be trusted then / Though never after” (my emphasis). Who else is this “one” but Mosca?

But if the explosive vitality of this opening diatribe against gold contains something like a blueprint for the wonderful energies of the mature comedies, why does so much time elapse between the expression of this potential in the epistle in 1600 and its realization in *Volpone* in 1606 or *The Alchemist* in 1610? Does Jonson himself at this point recognize the full measure or nature of his own originality? When he came somewhat later to translate the work of Daniel Heinsius on Aristotle, *De Tragoediae constitutione*, published in

1611, he highlighted an interestingly new dimension in the principle of imitation:

Aristotle was the first accurate critic, and truest judge; nay, the greatest philosopher, the world ever had: for, he noted the vices of all knowledges, in all creatures, and out of many men's perfections in a science, he formed still one art. So he taught us two offices together, how we ought to judge rightly of others, and what we ought to imitate specially in ourselves. (Parfitt, ed., p. 449)

The notion of a poet's discovering what he should imitate in himself adds an interesting complication to the principle of following one excellent predecessor or the principle of observing how the best writers have imitated others. The extent to which Jonson actually needed Aristotle's encouragement in this principle of self-discovery is, perhaps, an open question. The writing of the plays, after all, came before this judgment in *Discoveries*, and Jonson himself remarks (again following Heinsius) a paragraph or two later, "I am not of that opinion to conclude a poet's liberty within the narrow limits of laws, which either the grammarians, or philosophers prescribe. For, before they found out those laws, there were many excellent poets, that fulfilled them" (Parfitt, ed., p. 450). Nevertheless, Jonson's own comic liberty seems not to have been immediately or fully apparent to him at the time of writing his "Epistle to Elizabeth." He is there simply on the threshold of discovering it — of learning what he "ought to imitate specially" in himself. In giving his gift, he is still in the process of discovering his gifts.¹³

The same — or at least a very similar — process is also apparent in *Cynthia's Revels* (first acted in 1600). Crites is given some of his most memorable and energetic lines when he sketches the wealth of material available to the satirist in the middle of Act III. In fact, his third character sketch, following a "proud and spangled sir" (III.iv.12) and a "mincing marmoset" (III.iv.22), is a figure who again contains anticipations of Volpone:

A third comes giving nods
To his repenting creditors, protests
To weeping suitors, takes the coming gold
Of insolent and base ambition,
That hourly rubs his dry and itchy palms. (III.iv.35–39)

And this third is accompanied by a figure very like Mosca:

With him there meets some subtle Proteus, one
Can change and vary with all forms he sees;
Be anything but honest; serves the time;
Hovers betwixt two factions, and explores

The drifts of both; which, with cross face, he bears
 To the divided heads, and is received
 With mutual grace of either. (III.iv.42–48)

What is particularly interesting about these passages, however, is that while Crites understands their possibilities for the art of the satirist, he immediately distances himself. Any one of these figures offers material, “in sooth, / Such as the satirist points truly forth / That only to his crimes owes all his worth” (III.iv.49–50). The virtuous satirist is reluctant to owe any of *his* worth to the crimes of his target. He sees the potential, but doesn’t want to get mixed up in it, and he follows instead the advice of Arete (or Virtue) to show patience and to trust in the patronage of Cynthia:

spend your hours with us
 Your honoured friends, Time, and Phronesis,
 In contemplation of our goddess’ name.
 Think on some sweet and choice invention, now,
 Worthy her serious and illustrious eyes,
 That from the merit of it we may take
 Desired occasion to prefer your worth,
 And make your service known to Cynthia. (III.iv.92–99)

Cynthia’s Revels, like the “Epistle to Elizabeth” sets up an unresolved tension between the art of the satirist and the epideictic art required by the system of patronage. And while the play, like the poem, boasts about the originality of Jonson’s Muse, who will prove “new ways to come to learned ears” (Prologue, 11), it would seem that in neither case are the full terms of that originality fully worked out.

The two worlds (of the satirical and the epideictic) might in certain situations (and for certain people) be mutually exclusive, but they couldn’t remain so for Jonson, however much he may have wished to keep them apart or to “sing high and aloof” (Parfitt, ed., p. 161). The exigencies of his finances, no doubt, helped to push him to discover more thoroughly what his professional desires were — what he needed to imitate, in himself as well as in the world. But from a professional, as distinct from a merely economic, perspective, the better Jonson’s satire gets, the more thoroughly it is embroiled in the world, the whole world and not merely the world of privilege. And in this world, his poems, like his plays, are for sale. Sara Van den Berg remarks that “Jonson was the first Englishman to earn his living as a writer,”¹⁴ and he had made the decision to do so only in the closing years of the sixteenth century. A formative moment in arriving at or consolidating that decision is surely the moment of the composition of his poem for New Year’s Day, 1600 — a poem disclosing the potential of his comic genius (his

calling) alongside an ardent desire to be (in his living) independent of patronage *and* of strictly or obsessively commercial interests. Poetry, whether “mean” or not, was clearly destined to become his main Mistress.¹⁵

After the first decade of the seventeenth century, when he came to write the first of his two epigrams to his booksellers, to John Stepneth, he had a wry sense of the perils involved:

Thou, that mak'st gain thy end, and wisely well,
Call'st a book good, or bad, as it doth sell,
Use mine so, too: I give thee leave. But crave
For the luck's sake, it thus much favour have,
To lie upon thy stall, till it be sought;
Not offered, as it made suit to be bought;
Nor have my title-leaf on posts, or walls,
Or in cleft sticks, advanced to make calls
For termers, or some clerk-like serving man,
Who scarce can spell the hard names: whose knight less
can.
If, without these vile arts, it will not sell,
Send it to Bucklersbury, there 'twill, well. (*Epigrams*, III,
Parfitt, ed., p. 35)

Stepneth was arranging for the publication of Jonson's *Epigrams* in the spring of 1612, and this step would appear to have been an important moment in the process of deciding to assemble and publish the 1616 folio. In the words of Jonson's biographer, David Riggs, “The publication of *The Works of Benjamin Jonson* [in 1616] was the decisive event in Jonson's lifelong struggle to establish control over his own writing.” Riggs also makes the point that printing “invested the literary enterprise with a new aura of permanence,” as it made possible “a standardized uniform *book*. . . . By collecting and editing his work, and seeing it through the press, Jonson created an ‘authorized’ text that could be shared again and again with an educated readership.”¹⁶ But however well an authorized text increased the control of the writer over the writing, it also involved risking new hazards among readers and buyers.

How Jonson assessed those risks, however, seems to me a matter of some debate. Ian Donaldson, for example, commenting on the epigram to Stepneth, argues that

Jonson's strong distaste for the new print medium and for the bookseller's trade is . . . clearly evident in this divided poem. Bucklersbury was a street near Cheapside inhabited by grocers and apothecaries, who would be glad to dismember his book and use it as wrapping paper; a fate that his bookseller (so Jonson implies) would cheerfully tolerate as another form of sale.¹⁷

This assessment, I think, sells the bookseller short, and it misrepresents the breadth of the satire, which is zestfully egalitarian and is surely directed partly at the author himself. If the serving man is likely to struggle with the hard words, he is nevertheless better at it than the knight. And if anyone is prepared to be cheerful about selling the book for wrapping paper, it would appear more likely to be the author than the bookseller. Stepneth might tolerate that sort of sale, but if he is in the publishing business rather than the wrapping paper business, he is unlikely to be cheerful about it.

Nor does the poem seem to register a strong distaste for the new print medium or the bookseller's trade. The publisher is commended for practicing his trade "wisely well." The distaste is rather for the advertising business. The poet does not want his book to be a suitor. He does not want his "title-leaf on posts, or walls, / Or in cleft sticks, advanced to make calls / For termers." He wants the book, somehow, to make its own way, to be bought for what it is, not for what it advertises itself to be. This attitude is quite consistent with Jonson's attitude to his aristocratic patrons or patronesses. He wants his work accepted, not as an indulgence or a favour, not as a mere adjunct to some other enterprise or system (whether aristocratic or commercial), but as something that belongs, that occupies its own rightful and independent place in society. The particularity of the title-leaf on posts, on walls, and in cleft sticks testifies to a poet every bit as intimately acquainted with the world of the London bookseller as he is with the history and potential of the Sidney family, and while it may seem unduly difficult so to restrict the seller's marketing possibilities, the attitude is fully characteristic of Jonson. The role of the intellectual is to mix with society, to engage with it, but also to maintain a stubborn measure of independence from it.

If there is a division in Jonson's attitude, it would seem to focus less on a split between manuscript circulation and the new print medium than on the difference between the well educated and the badly educated. And this shows up more in the second "Epigram to My Bookseller" (number LVIII in *Underwoods*):

Thou, friend, wilt hear all censures; unto thee
 All mouths are open, and all stomachs free:
 Be thou my book's intelligencer, note
 What each man says of it, and of what coat
 His judgment is; if he be wise, and praise,
 Thank him: if other, he can give no bays.
 If his wit reach no higher, but to spring
 Thy wife a fit of laughter; a cramp ring
 Will be reward enough: to wear like those,
 That hang their richest jewels in their nose;

Like a rung bear, or swine: grunting out wit
 As if that part lay for a () most fit!
 If they go on, and that thou lov'st a-life
 Their perfumed judgments, let them kiss thy wife. (Parfitt, ed., p. 203)

The identity of the addressee in this poem is not known, but Parfitt says that "both Thomas Alchorne and Robert Allot have been suggested" (p. 540). In 1600, the latter had published *England's Parnassus*, an anthology of contemporary poetry, which includes work by Jonson.¹⁸ This poem, however, is from much later, perhaps as late as 1629. In its context in *Underwoods*, it is surrounded by poems that highlight Jonson's impoverished condition: "To Master John Burges" (a clerk of the Exchequer), skeltonics begging for an overdue pension; "To King Charles for a Hundred Pounds He Sent Me in My Sickness. 1629," an epigram thanking him for curing "the poet's evil, poverty." The epigram to the bookseller is remarkable, then, for not mentioning money, and one rather suspects that the omission indicates a relinquishing of any hope of making a living from the book trade.

In several respects, in fact, the poem suggests a kind of melancholy withdrawal from society. By this I don't mean that it shows a distaste for the seediest of London low life: body-piercing punks "That hang their richest jewels in their nose; / Like a rung bear, or swine." Such images display Jonson's typical gusto for the life he satirizes, vividly realizing the state of mind that combines ostentatious display with a readiness to be led by the nose, which has a bestial energy even in the midst of mental turpitude. Of the empty parenthesis in line 12, Parfitt says, "The blank presumably represents some obscenity, although I cannot think of a fitting one" (p. 540). This seems to me a rather demur remark, given the obvious context of prostitution and procurement. But again, the world of whores and bawds — and the suggestion that they are but the counterparts of an intellectual decadence — would not be out of place in Jonsonian comedy.

What does seem melancholy, however, is the critical uncertainty about the character of the bookseller. Though the address is epistolary and the addressee is identified as a "friend," this poem is unlike the first epigram in having no secure grasp of the character of the bookseller. And it has a corresponding insecurity as to the nature of the readers, or potential readers. The problem is not the simple one of readers who are straightforwardly critical of Jonson. It is rather that of readers who are less than candid, less than free and open, and whose judgments therefore must be filtered through the bookseller. The bookseller operates as a kind of spy — an "intelligencer" — who records the judgments of the reading public, assesses their qualifications, and dispenses gratitude. But the poem registers a deep ambiguity

about the reliability and character of the “intelligencer,” who may turn out to be a kind of double agent, whose deep loyalty may lie with the “perfumed judgments” of stinking opinions. Like Jonson’s second “Ode to Himself” (*Miscellaneous Poems*, XXXIII) on the failure of *The New Inn* in 1629 (“Come leave the loathed stage / And the yet more loathsome age” [Parfitt, ed., p. 282, ll. 1–2]), this epigram is vigorous in its anatomy of those elements in a culture that are hostile to the value of literature. In such a climate, the role of the intellectual and of the professional poet is stoic endurance.

Jonson’s vocation is marked by his sense of the poet’s high calling, as articulated in the “Epistle to Elizabeth,” and by his discoveries about the particular gifts of his particular calling — premonitory in the epistle, manifest in the great comedies and in several of the short poems, and buttressed by the critical principles recorded in his commonplace book. The sturdiness of his professionalism is one of the great central strengths of his genius, and it provides him with the resilience he needs, both in the world of aristocratic patronage and in the progress of his career through what seems to have been the increasingly harsh world of the booksellers. But there is more. In addition to being a visionary, a satirist, an independent voice, and a stoical sufferer, Jonson is almost always engaged, involved, embroiled — in Drummond’s words, “passionately kind and angry, careless either to gain or keep, vindictive, but, if he be well answered, at himself” (Parfitt, ed., p. 479). If Jonson isn’t always in or with society, society is always in him. And that, I think, is his final role: to be, to make in himself, the representative of the civilized society — emotional and intellectual — he hoped to bring about. His calling *is* his living, and he is married to Mistress Poetry, for better, for worse.

Dalhousie University

Notes

1. Ben Jonson, *Timber: or Discoveries*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 393. Jonson’s poems are also cited from this text, as are the quotations from *Conversations with William Drummond*.
2. L. C. Knights, “Ben Jonson: Public Attitudes and Social Poetry,” in *A Celebration of Ben Jonson*, ed. William Blissett *et al.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 169.
3. Deborah Montuori, “‘Masculine Issue(s)’: Alliances and Anxieties in Jonson’s Poems to Elizabeth Sidney, Countess of Rutland,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 23 (1997): 74.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 61 and 55.
5. For a general discussion of the importance of emulation and its relation to originality in the rhetorical tradition in which Jonson was trained, see Brian Vickers, Introduction,

English Renaissance Literary Criticism, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 22–39. For a particular discussion of the kind of emulation Jonson implies in several of his poems on the Countess and her father, see Montuori, esp. pp. 57–58, 60–62, and 69–71.

6. On the sources of Jonson's originality, see Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 108–14.
7. Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 119.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
9. G. A. Willkes, ed. *Cynthia's Revels*, in *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), V.xi.57–58. Subsequent reference are to this edition.
10. Robert C. Evans includes some interesting reflections on the meaning of this rivalry in *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989): "The rival poet's identity must have been clear enough to all involved; unfortunately for that very reason it has been lost to us. Although Jonson may have been referring to Samuel Daniel, most scholars agree that the rival was probably Michael Drayton, with whom he was still uncomfortable almost thirty years after the Rutland poem was written. Knowing precisely to whom he alludes, however, is less important than emphasizing the significance of such rivalries in his works generally as well as the ways the works themselves confront the challenges such rivalries presented" (p. 46).
11. The editions I have consulted are all silent on this point, but the period at the end of l. 19 is a kind of false stop, since the opening of l. 20 — "a present, which" — is merely in apposition to the "verse" that concludes l. 19, and the sentence is not finally played out until l. 26. See, in addition to Parfitt, Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson: Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 108, and C. H. Hereford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols., vol. 8: *The Poems and the Prose Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 113.
12. Sara J. Van den Berg, *The Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), p. 131.
13. Knights expresses the view that it is not possible "to find the comic and destructive dramatist in the author of *The Forrest*" and that this separation "partly explains a certain under-rating of the poems, which form as it were a separate province in Jonson's empire" (p. 172). My sense is that the province is not quite so isolated nor the comic and satiric dramatist quite so invisible in the poems as this supposes, though I agree that it is necessary to view the whole scope of Jonson's achievement if one is to assess individual poems with accuracy.
14. Sara J. Van den Berg, "True Relation: The Life and Career of Ben Jonson," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.
15. *Sejanus His Fall* (1603) is another play that comes between the "Epistle to Elizabeth" (1600) and *Volpone* (1606), and scholars have argued for the importance of this experiment in tragedy for Jonson's development. In Anne Barton's words, "it was for him a crucially important play, the tragic glass into which he needed to look if he was ever to escape from the impasse of the comical satires into the new, and liberating, comic form of *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*" (*Ben Jonson, Dramatist* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], p. 94). My point

is not to disagree with this claim, but only to argue that the seeds of the comic genius are already there to be discovered. See also William W. E. Slights, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 12–13 and 32–56.

16. David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 221. Riggs is also the source of my information about John Stepneth in this paragraph.
17. Ian Donaldson, “Jonson’s Poetry,” in Harp and Stewart, eds., p. 121.
18. Riggs, pp. 67 and 87.